



THE THIRTY-FIRST VOTE

By Agnes Louise Provost



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It happened in the good old days—not so long ago—when the State House ring was a name to conjure with, and the lobby was "run wide open" from the second Tuesday in January until the night of sine die adjournment, and men flourished and waxed fat upon the pecuniary complements thereof. Not that the lobby is by any means extinct, nor that the Legislature is now run under the motto of the Epworth League; but these are the foolish days of investigation committees, and things are not what they were. The lobby is there—oh yes! But there are sessions when it looks hungry, as it never did in the days of fatness.

Assembly Bill No. 213 had at last been reported by the committee on municipal corporations, and had passed its second reading without damaging amendment. It had begun to look as though Assembly Bill No. 213 would stay in the hands of the committee on municipal corporations indefinitely, and be smothered in its innocent youth, although innocence was scarcely its strong point. It was a charter bill, a "special," cleverly concealed beneath technical generalities, and was designed to accrue much power and unearned increment in the largest city in the State—especially to the officials thereof.

Each step had been a struggle, and the time was getting perilously short. It was now Thursday night, and the following Tuesday would be the day of charter election in that city, when the new charter was scheduled to be accepted at the polls by the free and intelligent votes of "the people. Before that day the bill must pass the House and the Senate, with all necessary delays under rules, and must also be signed by the Governor. No wonder "the gang" looked anxious, and the committee on municipal corporations had proved expensive. "You can't kiss this bill through," the chairman had said bluntly; but it had paid to be liberal.

"We'll have to jam her through to-night or die," mused Finnegan, elevating his legs to another chair, and surveying them with infinite content. "Lord, we have ten hours to spare! It's lucky the Senate and the Governor are pretty sure."

Kane grunted an assent. They were in one of the committee rooms, hazy with the smoke of many cigars. Winchell, the leader of the majority, had been writing at the table, and now he leaned back with a genial smile.

"Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one. A majority of one is pretty close, but we've got it. Williams makes the thirty-first vote."

"Yes, and a mighty doubtful vote, up to an hour ago. You should have heard Finnegan sugar him into it; Williams swore that he only did it for pure love of Finnegan, but he knew that his constituents would everlastingly rip him up the back for voting with the gang."

"Hang his constituents!" mumbled Winchell. "He'll bear watching yet. He'd give his last pair of socks to worm out of putting himself on record. It takes these jays from the agricultural counties to balk; but what with Finnegan's sugar, and my warning that I'd smash every huckleberry patch bill he put up if he voted with the opposition, I guess we have him fairly safe. It'll have to come up to-night, or never."

Winchell chuckled as he stowed his list safely in his pocket. He always enjoyed his little skirmishes with the cautious gentleman from Stafford county, who took himself so seriously, and toiled through his brief legislative career in the belief that he was sent here for the good of the State and in the undying interests of reform.

There was just time for dinner before the evening session would open, and there was every reason why Winchell and Finnegan and Kane, the honorable members from Hanover county, should not be late in their seats that night. As they left the State House, a dark, spry little man was close upon their heels. This was Van Horn, the leader of the opposition, and his smile, as he watched the broad backs ahead of him, was a miracle of astuteness. For he had just received a message from one of his most glibful lieutenants that he was in close communication with the gentleman from Stafford in Van Horn's room, and Van Horn was in a hurry to get there, too. That was why he smiled so broadly at Winchell's back, and he was still looking at peace with himself and the world when he entered his own room and greeted the two in possession there.

Half an hour later, Mr. Williams, of

Stafford, issued hastily forth from that hotel and hailed a cab. "Pennsylvania station," he said to the driver, and sighed with vast relief as the door slammed behind him.

Winchell stood in the doorway of the "Revision of Laws" room, and cast a speculative eye over the Assembly Chamber, as he counted his hard fought votes. It was a full session, and the clerk was already calling the roll, but Winchell noted that Williams was not in his seat. Nor the others, nearly all of the faithful were there, and well in hand, and Winchell knew that he had reason to be proud of his generalship.

Presently he saw Finnegan and Kane, still in hats and overcoats, push hastily past the doorkeepers. Finnegan sighted him first, and together, with dismay in their faces, they bore him back into the Revision of Laws room.

"Winchell," chattered Finnegan excitedly, "Van Horn has kidnapped our majority vote! Williams went home on the 7:10!"

"Hell!" Save for that explosive monosyllable, Winchell's wrath held him speechless. Kane nodded around the room and fumed impatiently.

"To get fooled like this at the last minute! Not the tag end of a second to waste, and off goes Williams and leaves the House deadlocked. Won't I smash

strolled into the Assembly Chamber after a time, to tell Van Horn.

Finnegan and Kane bolted out into the raw darkness and into the nearest cab. They were a daredevil pair, always in demand when any particularly reckless work was to be done, and that was why Winchell had chosen them for this mission. The cab driver winked to himself at the size of his retainers, and the cab bumped and rattled and lurched down State street at a gait which threatened dissolution in all its parts.

At the station Finnegan descended upon the gatekeeper and demanded the next train to Cedar town, where Williams lived. The gatekeeper looked at them with an irritating grin. He recognized these two Assemblymen, and he reasoned inductively that they were on mischief bent.

"Last train left 7:30. Next one 6:45 tomorrow mornin'. Shore service is bad this time o' the year," he added, dispassionately.

Finnegan looked at Kane. Kane looked at Finnegan. And Finnegan sat down upon a truck, and swore.

Back in the Assembly Chamber the legislative routine was running smoothly. Perhaps half a dozen bills had been introduced and referred, the reports of committees had been received and second readings rushed through, and the House was now ready to take up bills on third reading.

Assembly Bill No. 213, and he proceeded to say it, deliberately and without undue haste.

The hands of the Assembly clock crept around to 9:30. Ten o'clock struck. Ten thirty. The slow moving hands crawled on to 11, and passed it. The Speaker counted the lights in the chandelier, followed the pattern of the ceiling frescoes, and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Winchell's even, slow dropping words had in them no indication of a possible pause.

Van Horn awoke to a new interest in this speech. A foreboding of method in Winchell's madness began to dawn upon him, and he looked irritated and whispered earnestly to the men on his right and left and to the men in front of him. After an interval all four put their heads together and whispered again.

Winchell had the floor. He kept it, and the light of battle was in his eye as he raced with the clock. Some of his fellow members smiled, openly or behind their hands, others looked sour, but on the faces of the initiated was naught but heavenly innocence.

The galleries cleared slowly, and the reporters grinned and sprawled over their desks in various attitudes of ease. They were used to legislative tricks.

Winchell talked on, his words rolling out in uninterrupted smoothness, sen-

had left on the platform. Finnegan buttonholed him with cheerful friendliness.

"How do you do, sir? What's the next train to Cedar town to-night? We're in the biggest kind of a rush."

The night operator stared and grinned. It occurred to Kane that the employees of this road had an unpleasant habit of grinning.

"The next train? There isn't any next train. The next train left half an hour ago, and that was the last one up until 6 a. m."

Kane opened his mouth for a blasting anathema upon all shore trains, but stopped with the words frozen in mid air. On a siding, just beyond the station lights, he espied a square, bulky shadow, and he leveled a rigid finger in its direction.

"What's that?"

"That? Why, that's a hand car."

"Exactly," chuckled Kane triumphantly. "A hand car, and a clear track from now to 6 a. m. Now, my young friend, see here."

Kane laid his hand persuasively on the night operator's arm, and spared neither eloquence nor guile. Together he and Finnegan cajoled that doubtful and reluctant man for ten precious minutes, and then the gentlemen from Hanover clambered on the hand car and laboriously worked it out to the main track. They were not used to it, and the night operator's suggestions, al-

It was past midnight, and the gentleman from Stafford was sleeping the sleep of safety and virtuous content, when his doorbell jerked, and pealed and rattled with an appalling din. Visions of fire and death and disaster struggled through his mind as he tumbled out of bed and hurried uncertainly down stairs, dragging part of his wardrobe with him.

"Who is it?" he called warily, and the voice that answered filled his soul with weariness.

"It's Finnegan and Kane, of Hanover. Can we see you a minute?"

The door opened with obvious reluctance, Williams' disheveled head peering in hesitantly around it. Finnegan greeted him, hatless, breathless, but ever cheerful.

"Sorry to disturb you, but the session to-night is very important, and we are deputized to bring you back."

"There isn't a train," began Williams testily, but Kane cut him short.

"We have a special car. Too bad, but it wouldn't be safe to ignore the summons. There was a horrible row when they found you weren't there. Hurry, now; climb into your clothes and don't stop for frills. The whole House of Assembly is being kept in session for you."

When the gentleman from Stafford was bundled aboard the hand car, ten minutes later, he was rumpled and incomplete in toilet, and in a very bad temper. Every garment felt as though it were about to escape from its moorings; his collar button had lost itself in the fray, and the impatient Kane had hustled him off without collar or cuffs or tie, callously suggesting that he put the latter in his pocket, and purchase all missing articles in town the next day.

"Now, Williams," suggested Finnegan cheerfully, "just lend a hand and help work this thing. We nearly cracked our backs coming down, and we've got to go faster yet on the home run. You're not traveling on a pass this trip. The last train north reaches the junction in sixty-five minutes, and we'll make that train or die. It doesn't usually stop, you know, but we've ordered it flagged for your convenience, and it wouldn't be polite to keep it waiting. Nothing like a pull in this world. Now! Ready! Steady! Go!"

The gentleman from Stafford was portly, and unused to violent exercise. Black night was about him, a raw midnight wind penetrated to his shivering marrow, suggestive of rheumatism and grip and pneumonia. He groaned in spirit, cursing the charter bill and all connected with it, and reluctantly bent his back to the inevitable.

It was nearly 4 in the morning when Finnegan and Kane brought their prize into the Assembly Chamber, and the sight that met their eyes was beautiful to see.

The House of Assembly was still in session, and Winchell still had the floor. He was talking in the same level voice, but he was getting hoarse, and grim lines of anxiety had begun to show as the hours crawled by and his messengers did not appear.

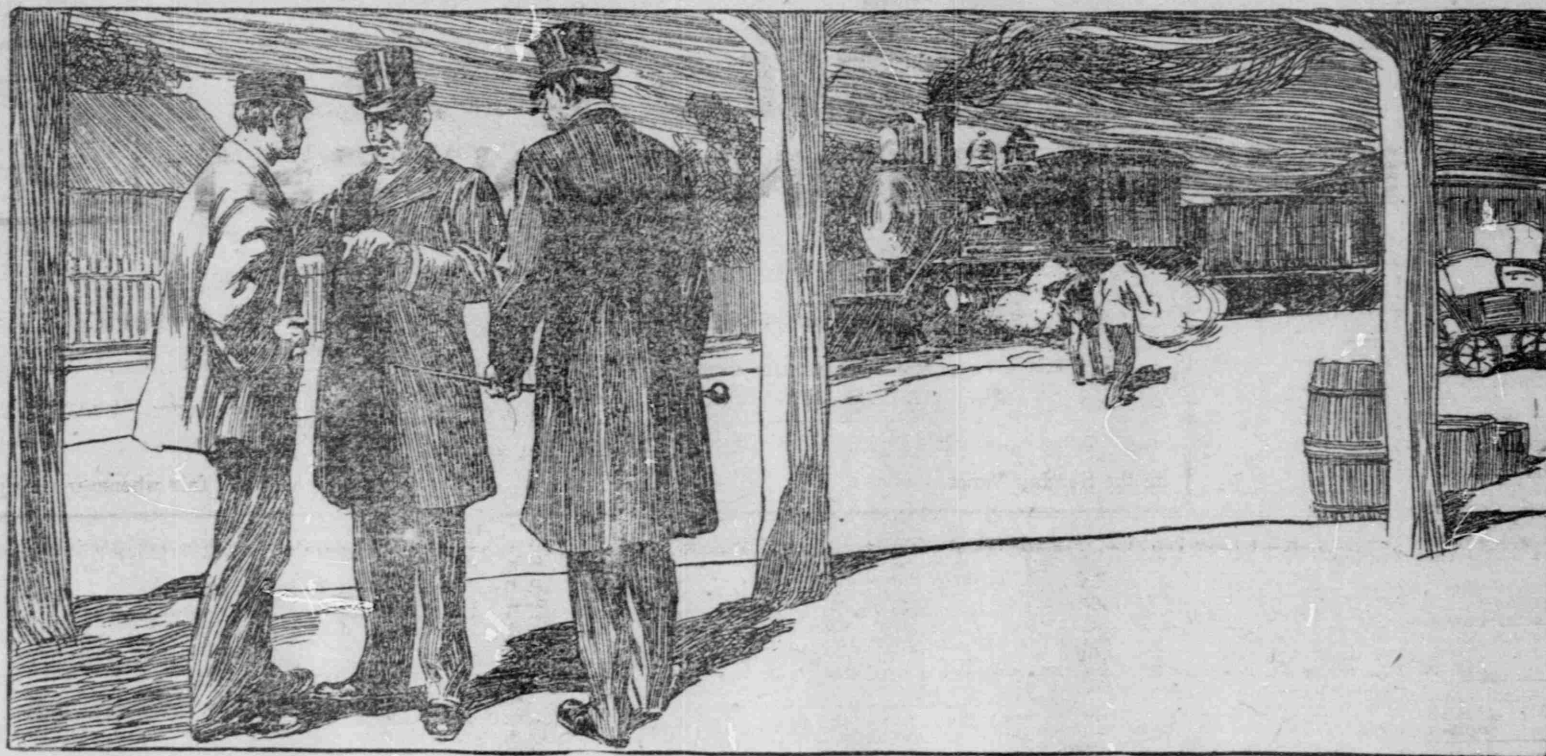
The House had been exhausted long since. Some were hunched down in their chairs, staring gloomily at floor or ceiling, others slept openly and shamelessly, and only Van Horn was still alert, watching his chance.

The Speaker put his hand to his mouth as the three travelers entered, one hatless, one gloveless, the third collarless, and all worn and disheveled and smudged from their work on the hand car, and the sleepers awoke suddenly at the howl of laughter which greeted the spectacle. Winchell dropped thankfully into his seat and laughed with the rest, while from a desk under the gallery there arose a weary voice of thanksgiving:

"Are you really through, Winchell? Thank God!"

Verily, the wicked prosper. Assembly Bill No. 213 passed House and Senate, and the Governor also, at high speed, and was a law on the day of charter elections. On that Tuesday "the gang" swung into line for a final effort, carried the polls and elected its own mayor, thanks to a judicious manipulation of ballot boxes, and lived high and royally upon the emoluments of office. To be sure, a few years later the voters of that city awoke to the knowledge that they were being eaten alive, and arose in wrath and turned the gang out neck and crop—perhaps to let another gang in; but those intervening years had oozed with fatness and plenty, and the members of the gang never depreciated the value of their services.

Of a truth, the way of the politician is past finding out.



Finnegan buttonholed him with cheerful friendliness. "How do you do, sir? What's the next train to Cedar town to-night?"

him when he gets back? Oh, I'll punch such a hole in his political career that he'll have to get a spy glass to find the remains of it!"

He shook a wrathful fist in the air, but Winchell stood motionless, his hands rammed deep in his pockets. There was an unholy glitter in his eye, and his under lip was thrust out in determination which boded ill for the recalcitrant Williams.

"They needn't think they've got me beaten yet," he muttered, after several moments of frowning calculation. "No, sir! I've fathered this bill, and fought for it, and by the Lord, she's got to pass, and pass to-night! Look here, Finnegan, I want you and Kane to go after that fellow and bring him back, on the quickest time you ever made. Can you manage it? I'll get the speaker's warrant for his arrest."

"Hooray!" crowed Finnegan exuberantly, but confining his cheer to a cautious undertone. "You can let us bring him back. Don't want any warrant—it only advertises the game and wastes time, and this thing must be done in a whisper. Necessity knows no law, and neither does Finnegan. Lord, Winchell, but you mustn't let 'em adjourn or pass on that bill before we get back!"

"They'll never get out alive," said Winchell, grimly, and Finnegan gave him a wink of matchless iniquity as he vanished with Kane.

As they went out into the glare of the corridors a railroad lobbyist stared at them in surprise. He wondered what deed of darkness was afoot, that these two were leaving the State House during so important a session. Bought, possibly, and paid for. Nevertheless, he

the railroad lobbyist who had noticed the two Assemblymen leave came in and leaned over Van Horn's desk. What he told seemed amusing to the leader of the minority, for he laughed a great deal, and Winchell, staring idly at the ceiling, exchanged a fleeting glance with one of his own lieutenants.

Van Horn was feeling excellently well pleased with himself.

"This is our pie now," he whispered confidentially to his right hand neighbor when the railroad lobbyist had gone. "This afternoon our friend Winchell had a majority for his charter grab, when we spirited Williams away and left him with a nice little deadlock, and now Finnegan and Kane have gone, presumably, to hunt up Williams, and that throws the whole game into our hands. They're three votes short, and we'll push 213 through for final passage to-night and knock 'em silly."

"Assembly Bill No. 213." The Speaker called off the number and handed the bill down to the clerk, and as the title was read out Winchell glanced swiftly at the clock. It was just 8. The Speaker's voice sounded again from the desk.

"This bill is now on third reading and final passage." He inclined his head toward Winchell, as introducer of the bill. "The gentleman from Hanover."

Winchell arose leisurely to his feet, and began his memorable speech for the charter bill.

It was not a particularly remarkable speech, so far as oratorical brilliance was concerned. Winchell's voice, over prone to extravagant flights, was unusually steady and even, as though conserving its strength for greater things. He had somewhat to say concerning

tenace following sentence, and scarcely a man in the House caring a rush what he might say. The gentleman from Hanover had the floor, and no man might take it from him until he chose to stop.

Because Finnegan sat down and swore it by no means followed that he had reached the limit of his resources. He paused in the middle of a comprehensive malediction upon the P. R. R. and all persons and things connected therewith and appurtenant thereto, and looked hopefully at the gatekeeper.

"What train goes nearest to that point?" he suggested.

"M'm, well, there's a train just due that would take you to Whittings Junction. It's some out of your way, and I don't know how—"

The rest of his remarks were lost to posterity, for the roar of the train for Whittings Junction was already beneath their feet. The gatekeeper grinned as the honorable gentleman from Hanover sprinted madly past him and bounded down the stairs to the platform.

It was the slowest of way trains, as they found to their disgust, but there was no choice, and Finnegan improved the opportunity to settle himself for a nap. Kane was less philosophic. He wriggled impatiently, taking frequent peeps at his watch, but never had minutes ticked themselves off with more exasperating slowness, and when it came time to awaken Finnegan it must be admitted that Kane did it with unnecessary vigor.

The night operator at Whittings Junction came to the door with inquiring interest and inspected the two full fledged gentlemen whom the late train

though in the main helpful, savored strongly of the critical.

As the station lights faded behind them, however, they began to warm to their work. They were obliged to, for seventy miles to the northwest of them Winchell was holding the House and watching for their return.

The hand car rattled swiftly past dim fences and blink stretches of field. Black woods gave place to shadowy farmhouses, looming in shapeless bulk against the darkness, without one friendly gleam of light, and still the gentlemen from Hanover plunged up and down with the heavy bars, their teeth set and breath coming hard. Finnegan's high hat had blown off and whizzed away into the darkness somewhere, and Kane judiciously removed his and tucked it between his feet. His snug gloves had split in every seam, and the bar was abominably cold.

"F-Finnegan," he gasped, jerkily, as they left another lonely station behind them, "this is no dream. Is your b-back broke?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! I'm all-whew!—blisters. I'll murder Williams for this. I knew I could fight, be, steal and swear, but I never knew I could run a hand car before."

After that there came no other sound save the rattle of wheels and deep breathing. The night operator had warned them that they must pass over a long trestle over a stretch of marsh, but when they reached it they knew it only from the hollow rumble of the car. Black space was above, and below and around them, without even a star. It seemed uncanny to be trying through the air that way, seeing nothing but shadows, and they blessed Williams in their hearts.